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COLUMNS

FDLE report on Jeffrey Epstein gives county officials a pass they don't deserve | Frank Cerabino

Jeffrey Epstein was a billionaire child rapist, but you couldn't tell from the way State Attorney Barry Krischer and Sheriff Ric Bradshaw handled his case.

Frank Cerabino
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In case you thought there would be no way to be freshly repulsed by the saga of Jeffrey Epstein, here's a sickening new chapter.

This week, Florida's top law enforcement agency, the Department of Law Enforcement, gave former Palm Beach County State Attorney Barry Krischer and Palm Beach County Sheriff Ric Bradshaw a big kiss by issuing a report that found them blameless for the shameful prosecution and free-to-leave-jail incarceration of the area's most notorious child rapist.

MORE ONLINE: Read The Palm Beach Post's investigation into the Jeffrey Epstein case

That's what Epstein was. A child rapist. And a prolific one, who sometimes needed multiple girl victims each day. To satisfy his urges, he recruited, raped and/or sexually molested dozens of underage middle school and high school girls at his Palm Beach home.

But from the start, these girls, who were as young as 13, didn't have a friend in the county prosecutor's office because they accepted money from the billionaire in exchange for becoming his sex toys.

"SA (State Attorney) Krischer was particularly concerned with a (Florida statute), which stated it was unlawful for an individual 'To offer to commit, or to commit, or to engage in, prostitution, lewdness, or assignation,' read the 24-page summary of the FDLE report.

"Per SA Krischer, this meant that the acts described in the testimony by the victims were also crimes that were committed by the victims (prostitution) ... even if they were a minor."

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This is a case of protecting the perp, not the victims

How sad is that when the top prosecutor looks at the sexual abuse of a ninth-grader, and says his hands are tied because the 14-year-old girl accepted $300 in cash after she was molested.

That's the argument that desperate defense lawyers ought to be saddled with making in front of skeptical jurors who know that when a 52-year-old man sexually gratifies himself with an underage girl, it's not the girl who ought to be locked away in prison.

Putting credence in the painting of statutory-rape victims as prostitutes isn't normal prosecutorial behavior. And the FDLE report just glosses over it, as if it were.

That's a pretty big set of blinders, considering the money and influence of the defendant in this case.

Krischer wasn't being prudent. He was turning his back on the most vulnerable of victims, all while in verbal contact with Epstein's criminal-defense lawyers.

That's fishy. And calling these girls prostitutes makes it fishier.

If that's the case, does the child who gets picked up by the rapist in a passing van deserve to held criminally liable for his or her sexual abuse because of the candy the rapist offered from his hand?

Would that be called sugar prostitution?

Palm Beach took such issue that it went shopping for a new prosecutor

Krischer's behavior was so aberrant that the Palm Beach police chief asked Krischer by letter to disqualify himself from prosecuting Epstein. That's when Palm Beach police took the case to the U.S. Attorney's Office in Miami.

That office prepared a 53-page criminal indictment that treated Epstein as the serious criminal he was. But then after an intensive influence campaign by

Epstein's criminal defense lawyers, the federal indictment was scrapped and the case was sent back to Krischer for a state-court plea deal in Palm Beach County that included the most lenient jail sentence imaginable.

Bradshaw approved a work-release deal with Epstein, who served his 13-month sentence in a private cell in the Palm Beach County Stockade. During that time, Epstein was allowed to leave the jail for a sham "job" for as many as 16 hours a day, seven days a week.

The FDLE report, in a tour-de-force of restrained prose, said "it appears that Epstein received differential treatment."

"Exponentially differential" would be a bit more accurate, I'd say.

In fact, Epstein's mostly-out-of-jail incarceration became a cottage industry for the PBSO, with 91 deputies collecting a total of $128,136 to keep an eye on him at work.

And they may have been a tad lax, considering that two young women have filed lawsuits claiming that Epstein molested them in his office while he was allegedly under guard on work release.

Sheriff had 'sole discretion' over whether Epstein qualified for work-release

But the FDLE said that no laws were broken by the unusual work-release deal Krischer and Bradshaw engineered for Epstein, even though the Miami prosecutor on the case, Assistant U.S. Attorney Marie Villafaña, said it was her understanding that Epstein, as a registered sex offender, wouldn't be eligible for work release.

"Regarding work-release, it is possible that AUSA Villafana misunderstood / misadvised that the federal nonprosecution agreement that designated Epstein a sex offender would automatically disqualify him from participation in the work-release program," the report said. "As previously detailed in this summary, participation in the work-release program was contingent on meeting the requirements set forth by PBSO's written work-release policy."

Palm Beach County courts give the sheriff "sole discretion" on the suitability of an inmate being granted work release. And the report concluded that Epstein was eligible for work release because he wasn't guilty of enough crimes.

Seriously. Oy.

"Epstein was convicted of two prostitution offenses, not three, which by the

aforementioned PBSO policy would not disqualify him from work-release," the FDLE report said.

There's that word again, "prostitution."

This appallingly misses the point. Epstein was allowed to be a serial rapist for years, and finally, he was brought to a sliver of justice on a limited number of charges – charges so limited and watered down that the authorities sidestepped the federal Crime Victims Rights Act by failing to inform the victims of the plea deal.

And then this billionaire child rapist is given special dispensation by the Palm Beach County sheriff to be allowed out of jail for most of his jail sentence, because, well, he's technically just a guy who got caught soliciting a couple of prostitutes.

Nobody has a right to work release. In fact, it's not even offered any more by the Palm Beach County Sheriff's Office. And yet Epstein got it. And now, we're all supposed to imagine that our public servants were well within their lanes, just doing their jobs.

Just a couple of straight arrows.

"After an extensive investigation FDLE determined that there was NO inappropriate or criminal activity on the part of any PBSO member with respect to their participation in Epstein's work release or the permit detail," Bradshaw said in a written statement.

And NO shame by Bradshaw, either, for joining Krischer to become the key allies in Epstein's Palm Beach County defense team.

So what have we learned from the FDLE's tidying up of the Epstein prosecution?

1. Underage girls who are sexually molested and raped are prostitutes.

2. It's OK for wealthy child rapists to pay large sums of money to their jailers in exchange for being allowed to spend most of their sentences outside of jail.

3. There's nothing to see here.

fcerabino@pbpost.com

@FranklyFlorida